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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the project was to identify common curricular needs among seven small contiguous midwestern school districts by means of parallel needs assessments conducted independently by each district. Operating under a state finance plan in which school spending is tied directly to student enrollment and faced with a decreasing number of students, the districts were desirous of avoiding or postpoining consolidation. Independent parallel needs assessments provided a method of cooperative planning which would allow them to retain their autonomy and yet share resources for those goal areas which were identified as common needs. (Author)

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PARALLEL NEEDS ASSESSMENTS AMONG SMALL, RURAL DISTRICTS AS A BASIS FOR COOPERATIVE PLANNING

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One of the most crucial problems facing the small, rural district in an era of declining enrollment and limited budgets is the paucity of resources which can be devoted to planning and development. In many cases the potential solution of cooperative projects with nearby districts is attractive only to the degree that it does not pose the threat of consolidation, a step the district may be most reluctant to take.

The project discussed in this paper involves seven small contiguous school districts with K-12 student enrollments ranging from 187 to 484. No district is more than 30 minutes from any of the other districts by school bus. The districts are currently operating under a state finance plan in which school spending is tied directly to student enrollment. Thus, the need for planning and wise use of resources is particularly acute.

Before the project was funded a series of initial planning meetings was held with superintendents from ten interested districts. Three of those districts eventually chose not to participate. Their reasons included school board fears that the project would lead to consolidation and in one case, the unwillingness of a district to commit a soon-to-be hired superintendent to such a project. Of the seven districts choosing to participate in the project, six were public school districts and one was a parochial district. The initial planning meetings served to lay the foundation for the project and to define parameters within which the districts would be comfortable. It was agreed, for example, that there would be a significant amount of community involvement in defining important school goals. It was also agreed that the needs assessments would be conducted separately within each

district with a procedure common to all, thereby providing information useful to each individual district while permitting the definition of common needs.

As a result of these planning meetings, a proposal was written and the project was funded as a planning grant under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as amended. After the assurances of funding, a series of meetings among the superintendents and evaluation consultants outlined the specific procedures to be followed.

It was decided at that time to use the needs assessment model developed by the Center for the Study of Evaluation at the University of California at Los Angeles. An educational need was defined as the discrepancy between actual and desired student performance in a goal area. The method involves selecting a complete set of educational goals; arriving at a rating of each goal by perceived importance; selecting suitable measures of student performance on specified goals; establishing criterion levels of satisfactory performance for each measure; assessing student performance; and comparing actual and desired performance to arrive at educational needs.

The superintendents defined the following input groups to be used in the rating of educational goals: school superintendent, principal(s), teachers, students, community members, and school board members. From each community a group of twelve persons was selected as a steering committee: superintendent (1), principal (1), teachers (2), board members (2), student (1), community members (5).

A needs assessment workshop involving instruction in the CSE model, simulation activities, and small group discussion was conducted

by a CSE staff member and involved representatives from each district. At a joint meeting of the 12-person steering committees from each district, the general procedure was presented and participants discussed the value of receiving input from each group; members independently assigned percentage weights to each group. The final weightings for groups within community were derived by averaging responses from steering committee members from that community.

At a second meeting of the steering committee, members discussed the set of goals to agree on the meaning of each and to add any area they felt was missing. (The basic set of goals used was the set of 106 elementary school goals as established by the Center for the Study of Evaluation. Additional goals in home economics and career education had been added in a previous project to make the set suitable for use in a K-12 needs assessment.) On the basis of the committee discussion, four additional goals were added in the areas of agriculture and mass media.

The rating of the goals by importance was conducted in separate meetings within each community. Steering committee members acted as resource persons for the raters in discussing the general procedures to be followed and familiarizing the raters with the goal statements. For each community the following numbers of raters were used: superintendent, principal (1-3), students (10), board members (5-7), community members (10), and teachers (all). Instructions to the raters included the following guidelines:

> . . . . we would like you to rate each goal in terms of how important it is for the school to help the student achieve that particular goal. In doing this task, do not consider the feasibility or practicality of measuring performance on a goal. Base your judgments solely on how important a goal is in terms of the characteristics students should have as a result of their schooling. Some goals are, of course, more appropriate for some grades than they are for others. Thus, do your ratings on the basis of what goals should be attained by the end of the 12th grade.

Each goal was printed on a separate card and each rater sorted the goals independently using a semi-forced distribution. The goals were sorted into five envelopes labelled according to degree of importance where 1=Unimportant, Inessential, or Irrelevant, and 5=Very Important, Crucial, or Essential.

Utilizing the weighting factors previously determined for each community by its steering committee, the ratings from each group were combined as weighted linear combinations to give each goal a numerical value for each community. Then for each community it was possible to arrange the goals in order of perceived importance.

According to the model to be used, the next step involved the selection of the most important goals to become the basis for setting criterion levels and assessing student performance. For purposes of cooperative planning it was decided to select goals which ranked in the top quarter of all 118 goals in terms of perceived importance for five, six, or seven of the communities. The high degree of agreement between districts as to the relative importance of various goals (Pearson r's were in the high .80s to mid .90s), resulted 24 goal statements that were among the top quarter in importance for five or more of the districts. These 24 goal statements became the basis for the assessment of perceived and measured student performance.

At a meeting of combined community steering committees, results of the goal rating were presented and discussed. The steering committees then rated these 24 goals on a perceived level of current district performance ranging from 0 to 100 according to their perception of how their individual district was meeting the goal. The evaluation consultants then presented their recommendations for assessment instruments

to be used in gathering data on student performance in each area. These instruments were, in general, chosen from those recommended by the evaluators on the basis of input from CSE materials, Mental Measurement Yearbooks, and test files; some new measures were devised. Because some of the goal areas to be assessed were in related areas, it was possible to make multiple uses of some instruments. (For example, the California Test of Personality provided several subscales appropriate to various affective goal areas). Each school had given the evaluators outlines of their school standardized testing plans and in several of the basic skill areas it was possible to use data which was already available within the district. Copies of the recommended assessment instruments were distributed and discussed. Individual districts could decide to use the recommended instrument or select one they felt to be more appropriate. For purposes of selecting common needs there were some advantages in maintaining a uniform assessment procedure and these advantages were discussed with the steering committees. In most cases, the committees decided to adopt the recommended instrument.

A further task of the steering committees involved setting criterion levels of satisfactory student performance in each of the goal areas. A discussion involving members from all communities explored the need for realistic criterion levels and some of the various ways those levels could be set. Working within communities, representatives set criterion levels for each of the 24 goal areas on instruments to be used within that district. As expected, setting criterion levels was a time-consuming and often frustrating experience. Extra meetings in individual districts were necessary to complete this task.

After criterion levels had been set, a schedule for student assessment was established. The assessment plan was devised with practical school concerns in mind: 1) wherever possible, existing data were to be used; 2) affective measures were to be administered in such a way as to insure anonymity of individual students; 3) assessment was to be distributed across grade levels so that excessive testing was not imposed on any particular group of students; and 4) analysis of student performance in basic skill areas was concentrated in the upper elementary grades.

Where possible the assessment instruments were purchased collectively by the seven districts and rotated through the districts. Each district administered the instruments and compared the results with its previously set criterion levels. Then the steering committee for each community considered the results and reported the results on the following scale relative to minimum acceptable performance: exceeds, reaches, approaches, somewhat below, significantly below the school-established criterion level.

Compiling the above information, it was possible to identify those common goals where four or more districts did not reach their desired criterion level. It was also possible to note those goals where the average student performance rating as perceived by the steering committee fell below a rating of 40 (where 50 was "just right").

Based on assessed student performance relative to community established criterion levels, educational needs were identified in four or more districts in each of the following areas:

Neuroticism-Adjustment
Dependence-Independence
Socialization-Rebelliousness
School Orientation
Need Achievement
Practicing Health & Safety Principles
Speaking

For the following goals, four or more of the individual community steering committees perceived student performance to be somewhat below a desirable level:

Listening Reaction & Response
Speaking
Career Information
Occupational Appreciation
Knowledge & Interpretation of Mass Media

Based on the results of the assessment, the evaluators presented a series of recommendations that involved cooperative efforts in seeking solutions to common problems. The focus of these recommendations was the list, presented above, of those goal areas in which four or more districts had identified needs in terms of discrepancies between actual and desired student performance. In those cases for which there was a perceived need, districts were advised to gather additional data and/or seek more effective ways of communicating actual student performance to the district at large.

In the case of the goal Knowledge and Interpretation of Mass Media, the evaluators felt that it was a perceived need and perhaps also an actual need. Due to the lack of available instruments in this area, assessment of student performance was difficult at best. In consultation with a professor of English involved in the area of propaganda analysis, an instrument was constructed. The instrument was not used by all of the districts; some districts indicated they preferred to use a locally developed measure. Based on the assessment data available, the perceptions of steering committee members and the fact that none of the schools had made provisions in their curriculum for teaching students to be critical consumers of mass media, the evaluators concluded that this was an area of actual as well as perceived need, and one which

the districts could reasonably seek a common solution.

The evaluators' recommendations for planned curricular change focused on the goal areas, Practicing Health and Safety Principles, Speaking, Mass Media, and several goals in the affective domain. In planning their recommendations, the evaluators considered two major factors: First, because of the current and projected financial conditions of the districts, planned curricular changes should not commit the district to large amounts of continuing financial commitment after federal funding would cease. Second, because of the lack of resources for curricular development within the small districts, there were advantages in importing rather than developing needed curricula.

The recommendations presented below were accepted by the districts. First, to meet the needs of goal Knowledge of Health and Safety Principles, each district would have the health personnel of the district (nurse, doctor, etc.) conduct in-service sessions with the respective staffs on how to incorporate health and safety education into appropriate facets of the curriculum.

Second, a cluster of goal areas involved the affective domain: Neuroticism-Adjustment, Dependence-Independence, Socialization-Rebelliousness, School Orientation, and Need Achievement. To meet these needs, the evaluators recommended that schools cooperatively seek in-service training for their teachers in the affective domain. A plan of in-service based on principles outlined in Schools Without Failure by Dr. William Glasser was developed to facilitate changes in the affective component of the schools' program.

Third, needs in the goal areas of Speaking and Knowledge and Interpretation of Mass Media could be addressed jointly by district

adoption of course materials developed in Media Now, a packaged and highly exportable, validated Title III project.

The recommendations were accepted by the communities and became the basis of a Title III operational grant proposal which has been funded. (Six of the communities are involved in the operational grant. The seventh and smallest community withdrew because of financial considerations.)

The most direct outcome of the project was the funded operational grant which allowed the schools to address cooperatively several of their systematically identified curricular needs. Discussion with members of the steering committees revealed that the project had significant additional benefits. First, by the nature of its major activities, the project provided opportunities for dialogue among school staff, students and community members about their expectations of the school. Second, the assessment phase of the project caused the schools to interpret and use previously gathered student achievement data. Third, representatives from several of the districts indicated that information gathered as part of the project would lead to curricular modifications made within their particular district. Finally, enrollment and financial realities will probably lead to the eventual consolidation of some or all of these districts; the project has served to lay a groundwork of planning by focusing on similarities between the districts and providing a precedent of mutual effort to address their common needs.